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# LOVE, PLURAL SUBJECTS & NORMATIVE CONSTRAINT

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## abstract

*Andrea Westlund's account of love involves lovers becoming Plural Subjects mirroring Margaret Gilbert's Plural Subject Theory. However, while for Gilbert the creation of a plural will involves individuals jointly committing to pool their wills and this joint pool directly normatively constraining those individuals, Westlund, in contrast, sees the creation of a plural will as a ongoing process and she rejects the possibility of such direct normative constraint. This rejection appears to be required to explain the flexibility that allows for a central place for reciprocity in loving relationships. However, this paper argues against the existence of such flexibility and presents instead the case that variance in the normative pain of rebelling against the collective will should be understood by replacing Gilbert's notion of all-or-nothing pooling of wills with an account that sees wills as becoming entangled through levels of identification with the plural subject.*

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## keywords

Constraint, collective intentionality, love, union, plural subject theory

*“Whenever infatuation begins, if given the opportunity  
it transforms itself into a continuing romantic love ....  
With this continuing romantic love it feels  
to the two people that they have united to form  
a new entity in the world, what might be called a we.”*  
(Nozick 1995, 232)

1.  
Love and  
Forming a We

Two strangers kissing on a hedonistic night out drinking may well remain nothing more than lustful individuals, however on many accounts of love (such as that of Robert Nozick quoted above) moving beyond such initial stages of desire involves becoming united in some real sense; a move from a mere set of separate *Is* into a combined *we*. Marriage might be thought to be the clearest form of such a move, with its formal vows and declarations, however such relationships are possible without legal ties and for want of a name I will dub this kind of relationship a “committed romantic relationship”, for brevity henceforth referred to as a CRR<sup>1</sup>. Talk of becoming a *we* may well fit with our experience of love but is it *literally* true? Even when we are most deeply in love we remain distinct biological entities; never actually becoming one creature with two heads. To meet the challenge of making sense of this it seems obvious to look to the growing literature around what has been called “Collective Intentionality”. Of particular relevance to Nozick’s work is the “Plural Subject Theory” (PST) of Margaret Gilbert; for his talk of forming a *we* mirrors her focus on “... the central sense of the pronoun ‘we’” (Gilbert 1992, 152) but I will start with the account of CRRs proposed by Andrea Westlund as, while in some ways similar to Gilbert’s PST account<sup>2</sup>, it poses some illuminating challenges to it.

Westlund suggests that CRRs (or as she calls them relationships of “companion love”) (Westlund 2008, 558) involve the formation of a plural subject with a particular structure; a structure that respects the reciprocity that she sees as essential to love. While Westlund invokes the idea of a plural subject she

1 I do not want to claim that my description of CRRs *stipulates* the only way people can be in love, rather just that it *describes* a kind of loving relationship we commonly form.

2 In her paper on marriage (2008) Westlund does not explicitly state that she is attempting to apply a Gilbert-*esk* framework, indeed she makes reference to a number of other authors (Bratman, 1999, Roth 2004, Searle, 1990, Tuomela & Miller, 1988, and Velleman, 1997) and seems to imply that her account is relatively neutral between them. However, the way in which she invokes the notion of “pooling of agency” and sets out the notion of a “shared practical perspective” *does* appear to be particularly fitting with Gilbert’s framework. Her engagement with Gilbert is more explicit in an earlier draft of her paper (published as a “working paper”, Westlund, 2005). She does not appear to have read the work where Gilbert most explicitly deals with love (Gilbert, 1996) though she does appear to be acquainted with a great deal of Gilbert’s work.

rejects the claim that normative constraint arises directly from being part of one. She thinks this necessary to account for the flexibility between parties she sees at the heart of loving relationships. This normative constraint is a key element of Gilbert's theory and I will challenge Westlund's rejection of it but in doing so I will argue that CRRs *do* demonstrate a related phenomena that might be confused with

Westlunds flexibility i.e. variability of the pain of resisting such constraint. My tentative solution will be to urge the replacing of Gilbert's discrete (i.e. all-or-nothing) voluntary pooling of the wills with a continuous (i.e. open to various degrees) notion of wills becoming entangled through levels of necessary identification with the plural subject.

## 2. Westlund's Plural Subject Account

Westlund worries that the union view of love inasmuch as it seems to suggest that lovers become psychologically or ontologically melded appears to be contrary to something fundamental to her understanding of CRRs: reciprocity. Reciprocity seems to require each agent to value the other's interests. The union view appears to dissolve the interests of each into the *we*. What we can call the "*problem of reciprocity*" is the worry that it is not possible to value the interests of the other if they have been dissolved into a *we*. Rather than give up on the union view Westlund believes this problem can be overcome by developing an account of the union in question that does not entail melding. She takes this to be possible if the union is of the form (*à la* Gilbert) of the creation of a *plural subject*.

For Gilbert plural subjects are the willed creations of individual agents; they are the result of those agents jointly committing to, within a certain scope of activity, *pool their agency*. Imagine a couple taking a trip together, for Gilbert what makes their travelling *together* stronger than merely travelling in proximity (temporal and/or spatial) is that the agents can be said to have jointly manifested and accepted "... willingness to constitute with the other a plural subject with the goal that they travel in each others company" (Gilbert 1992, 163). Plural subject-hood thus involves agents remaining as individuals, i.e. merely placing some of their agency into a shared pool, a pool with a specific goal or stance, rather than becoming psychologically or ontologically melded. Westlund is not entirely clear on how introducing the notion of plural subjectivity helps but I believe we can read her as saying that it avoids the problem of reciprocity because forming a plural subject need not destroy the self and thus the interests of each individual remain intact.

Plural agents can be transitory; e.g. the travellers in Gilbert's example may have met for the first time at the train station and travel together solely for one trip, or they can have more open-ended/extended scopes; e.g. the travellers may be regular fellow commuters. Clearly CRRs are of the latter type, indeed in marriage the participants pledge to be as one *until death parts them*. So far so good, but we might ask, given that plural subjects can have all kinds of implementations, what is the specific scope of a committed *romantic* relationship? Gilbert suggests that it might be "... a specific primary goal: something like the well-being of both parties equally" (Gilbert 1992). While Westlund sees reciprocity as a vital part of what it is to be in a CRR she does not think that it is the direct goal of CRRs rather she claims that it characterises the nature of *how* CRRs try to achieve their main goal, which is simply *living as one*. Living as one will involve all sorts of immediate shared goals; to go for a walk, to buy a sofa, to discipline their child etc. but always "... the projects and plans undertaken by companion lovers are ways of realizing an overarching desire to be (and do) together" (Westlund 2008, 558).

For Westlund achieving the goal of living together *in a loving way* has two elements; firstly, sharing reasons as well as sharing ends, and, secondly, sharing these in a way that engages with the individual interests of each party. Sharing in ends means together aiming at doing particular things *as a couple*. Sharing in reasons, means together taking certain considerations to count in favour for them *as a couple* to do those things. Together these can be thought of as a process of forging a *plural will*. Take a couple who are planning to go on holiday; on Westlund's account this can be contrasted with strangers who, having won a game show, are negotiating a single location to be whisked away to – the important difference is that the couple's aim is not just to come to *independently* converge on a single destination, rather, their aim is to make the decision jointly. So, rather than weighing up all their individual preferences and trying to find a holiday that merely maximises these as far as possible, the couple will try to find reasons that they can agree count in favour of a holiday for them *jointly*; e.g. "I love culture and my partner loves beer but *we* want to go to Majorca because *we* want to go somewhere hot"<sup>3</sup>. All of which is not to say that joint considerations about what counts as a reason for them jointly cannot take each individuals preferences into account, just that what counts as their collective preference is not automatically given by

3 The example with a slightly different presentation is Westlund's (2009, 1)

finding the point of maximum cross over between individual preferences. Thus discussion ends not with the discovery of shared reasons but rather in their creation through *joint acceptance* (Westlund 2009, 6). In this sense the plural will is a "... joint product of collective deliberative agency" (Westlund 2008, 567).

2.  
Westlund's  
Plural Subject  
Account

For Gilbert the plural will is created by individuals pooling their personal wills. Doing so does *not* mean that they are then left with no individual will, for our wills are not finite substances, but it does mean that (within the scope of the area of concern of the *we* in question) they are *rationally committed* to whatever the plural will is committed to; by voluntarily taking part in the plural will they become joined to it. The joint nature of this plural will means that it is under the control of the participants *together*; no one participant is individually in a position to unilaterally reject its demands by a simple personal change of mind or declaration. For example, Gilbert says of a couple walking together that, if one abandons the walk, the other might well rebuke them by saying "You can't turn round, *we* said *we* would walk to the top!" The normative authority of the plural will arises *directly* from the nature of the joint commitment required for the construction of a plural subject – the plural will, formed collectively, can only be changed or rescinded collectively (see Gilbert 2008, 504). This gives rise to the following two criteria. Firstly, the obligation criteria which says that each participant has a pro tanto obligation to promote fulfilment of that which is intended by the plural will. Secondly, the permission criteria which says that participants understand that they are not (ordinarily) in a position to unilaterally "by a simple change of mind" remove the constraints imposed on them by the obligation criteria<sup>4</sup>. For Gilbert this normative constraint is not some additional feature of morality, peer pressure or politeness, rather it arises *directly* from the collective will – it is akin to the normative constraint that as individuals we face with our own intentions; e.g. if I intend to give this paper today but I actually stay in bed, then I have done something normatively wrong – likewise if *we* intended to together give a paper today but *we* stay in bed then we have done a similar wrong. The key difference between the plural will and one's individual will is that we are in a position to unilaterally change our individual wills however each

4 Gilbert (2000, 17) Though note, Gilbert allows that background conditions may allow an individual to control the plural will, e.g. "If one partner is discovered to have engaged in sexual activity with a third party, the offended partner may aver, 'We're through!' and the other may not question that point" because of "... the existence of an established [background] condition" (2006, 110).

individual is not in a position to unilaterally change the plural will.

Westlund does not give a direct argument against the general possibility of such normative constraint<sup>5</sup>. However it is, she believes, contrary to her account of CRRs. In contrast to a plural will that each participant becomes joined to, Westlund's (not fully spelled out) view is that the creation and maintenance of a plural will involves an ongoing 'dance of union, separation and reunion', that is, it involves individuals being engaged in an "evolving framework" of plural stances to which they must "*continuously* reaffirm". Westlund does not discuss Gilbert's scenarios of dissent, such as the two walkers above – if she did she would have to reject the picture Gilbert paints for her view implies that with regard to collective plans each participant must have " ...some discretion over her own follow-through" (Westlund 2009, 14). That is not to say that Westlund wants to claim that the plural will does not have *any* kind of sway over each individual. If this were the case then it would be hard to see how it could play the role of making the reasoning of couples in CRRs fundamentally different from that of the game show bargainers. However, Westlund explains such sway by claiming that it exists because there is a *further* commitment to a robust form of mutual accountability.

#### 4. The Requirement of Flexibility

We might think that Westlund needs to differ from Gilbert in this way in order to solve the problem of reciprocity. The concept of plural subjects is supposed to solve the problem of reciprocity because it allows the possibility of forming unions without losing each partner's individual autonomy. Further, for Westlund a key part of this is that the joint deliberative agency, by which the couple form their collective, necessarily involves an ongoing sensitivity of each to the will of the other. This, it might be thought, rules out each party being directly constrained by the collective will, for their being so constrained might be seen as a block on each having such sensitivity. So for Westlund "... any balance that is struck between the parties must be regarded as defeasible in the face of further reflection and experience, such that a shared practical perspective is always a work in progress" (Westlund 2008, 568). I will refer to this in what follows as the *requirement of flexibility*.

There are two reasons to reject Westlund's rejection of direct normative constraint; firstly because of its importance to Gilbert's overall project,

<sup>5</sup> Merely suggesting that Gilbert's claim is "controversial" and pointing to others (Bratman 1999, McMahon, 2005) for a general argument (Westlund 2009, 14, footnote 26).

and secondly, because direct normative constraint *does* seem to be part of the actual phenomenology of being in a CRR. On the first point, a full defence would require an overall defence of Gilbert's project that is beyond the scope of this paper but it is worth noting that the ability to explain the normative authority of plural subject attitudes as arising *directly* from the nature of joint commitment is what makes Gilbert's account distinctly collectivist and thus able to explain the phenomenology that (she claims) individualistic accounts cannot.

On my second claim; it seems to me disputable that we experience CRRs as necessarily having the flexibility that Westlund describes. It is true that when a relationship is healthy each party tries to take the needs of the other into account when engaged in joint deliberation. In the holiday example we would say that if the couple, Mary and Clare, are in a well functioning CRR then each party should try to accommodate the desires of the other and to compromise when these do not fit with their own. Even once they have come to their collective decision, i.e. once they have constructed their collective will, then *if they truly care for each other* each will be open to the possibility of further deliberation over its content. This doesn't mean that the collective will itself must be *automatically* reflective of any change in each individuals perspective. If Mary comes to realise that she hates hot nights, then this *does* mean that (given Clare's love for her) Clare ought to be open to re-engaging in joint deliberation and to their jointly changing their mind, but it *does not* imply that the collective will must automatically cease to hold sway. In parallel with Gilbert's walkers I suggest that if on the way to the airport Mary turned round and stated walking back home, Clare would be justified to say: "You can't go home, we said we were going to Majorca!"

Further to Westlund looking for flexibility in the wrong place in healthy CRRs, she also idealises love by ignoring the fact that *unhealthy CRRs still count as CRRs*<sup>6</sup>. Feelings of being a *we* do not necessarily disappear with the failure of each party to treat the other with reciprocity. Once we allow the phenomenology of badly functioning CRRs into our picture then the fact that there is no necessary flexibility at the level of the collective will becomes all the more apparent. Given that Westlund seems to believe that being bound to the collective will requires an additional personal commitment she would have to say that the shared perspective merely dissolves in the face of one, or both, parties ceasing to continuously

6 A similar point (though not directed at Westlund) is noted by Gilbert, 1996.

reaffirm the framework which takes the other into account; but this is misguided as even in bad relationships we can feel the constraining force of the collective will.

4.  
The  
Requirement  
of Flexibility

While Gilbert gets closer to the phenomenology of love than Westlund, I will now argue there is *something* overly restrictive in her set up, just that it is not what Westlund thinks it is. My claim is that there is variance in the levels of what we might call “normative pain” when rebelling against the plural will of different CRRs. Just as we can understand physical pain as a negative feeling, of variable strength, experience of which indicates bodily damage, normative pain is negative feeling, of variable in strength, experience of which indicates normative transgression. This is, I believe, evident in the cases described below. Unfortunately, for showing this to be the case, the direct normative commitment of the will that Gilbert describes is not the only thing that provides reasons for the individual to feel tied to the *we* in cases of love – there are of course also moral, romantic, practical and further reasons in play. My claim is not that these other reasons do not matter – only that direct normative constraint of the will plays an important part in the mix. I’ll proceed by contrasting three examples to illustrate the variability of normative pain:

**Early days:** Imagine a newly formed couple, Bill and Ted. They have been together for a few months, seeing each other once or twice a week. They see themselves as very much in love, they are full of the strong feelings of lust and desire, but live in separate houses, have separate groups of friends and different hobbies.

**Long term and going strong:** Now contrast this with our couple from the example above, Clare and Mary. Let’s say that they have been together for 25 years, bought a house together, adopted and raised a child together, share friends and have the same hobbies. They feel still very much in love.

**Coming apart:** Patrick and Madeleine have been in a relationship longest of all, 30 years. They do live together, and pay bills jointly and have raised children. But they also do an increasing amount of things apart, have separate friendship groups and enjoy different social activities. They don’t really feel much romance toward each other and often find themselves attracted to other people.

Now imagine that each of these couples is on their way to the airport and



one of each of them turns round and starts walking back home. Each rebel will be open to a rebuke of Gilbert's form: "You can't go home, *we* said *we* were going to Majorca!" However, I suggest that the act of rebelling, will feel different (in a relevant way) to each; When Ted turns round to Bill and announces that he is not going, the wrong that he is committing by violating the collective will feel less normatively painful than that which will be felt by Mary in doing the same. Similarly, the wrong of Madeleine's doing so will feel worse than Ted's, though not as normatively painful as Mary's deviation.

I am not claiming that any of the couples face *no* obligation towards their collective wills, rather that the degree of normative pain of breaking these obligations will vary. It is the existence of this phenomenon and the way in which it mimics a certain aspect of Westlund's description of flexibility that accounts for a certain level of intuitive plausibility to Westlund's rejection of Gilbert's account of direct normative constraint. Of course this could all be a function of variance in other factors; the different level of moral, romantic, practical obligations felt by each party. However, that the rebuke may feel more normatively painful to Madeleine (who is not getting that much out of her relationship any more) than to Ted (who is infatuated) suggests to me that the difference lies in the nature of the *we* rather than the personal feelings of each party. Further, given that the rebuke makes *direct* reference to the will of the *we*, I think we should look for variance towards this relation to explain this phenomenon.

So, how can we make sense of the variability between the couples? In what follows I give a rough sketch of the type of account I think could do this<sup>7</sup>. Such an replaces Gilbert's discrete, all-or-nothing, voluntary pooling of the wills with a continuous notion of wills becoming entangled through levels of necessary identification with the plural subject. The variance in the three holiday cases will thus be explained by variance in the amount to which the individuals cannot help but identify with the collective, where this variance will in turn be explained by how much of their own lives have been lived, and thus only fully *make sense*, within the scope of the collective agency.

The background to this claim is an understanding of what it is about commitments of the will in general that bind us. What is wrong, one

7 The argument here is condensed because of limitations of space, I proving an extended account in Kisolo-Ssonko (*forthcoming*).

might ask, with agentive anarchism, i.e. doing whatever one feels the compulsion to do at any time and not feeling committed by what one has willed? According to Michael Bratman our seeing ourselves as being constrained by the commitments' of our wills is necessary for us to be able to understand ourselves as agents who can govern our own lives<sup>8</sup>. This is because the commitments of our wills provide the scaffolding necessary to construct a place "where-I-stand stand" out of the multiple of elements of our psychological stew. I propose that we can extend this claim to explain the normative power of commitments of the collective wills for couples in CRRs; i.e. that each lover must see themselves as constrained by the will of the *we* that they are part of in order to see that *we* as a unified agent that can act<sup>9</sup>.

The case is not completely symmetrical between individuals and collectives. For individuals one always needs to have a where-I-stand as if we can't see ourselves as individual agents there is nowhere left to retreat. It follows that there is no variability in the normative pain of breaking with our own wills<sup>10</sup>. For a collective we *do* always need to have a where-we-stand for the possibility of collective agency. However, there is at least some possibility of retreating back to our own individual agency. What stops such a retreat being *too* easy is that part of our understanding of ourselves will be bound up in being able to see the collective as acting. Insofar as we have already lived part of our lives through the collective we can only continue to understand our contributory action as the kind of thing we set it out to be if we are able to see the collective as an agent, and because this requires its commitments of will to constrain, we must see them as doing so<sup>11</sup>. This difference between the foundation of the power of the individual will and the collective will is, I believe, what explains the variability in the three holidaying couples. The variability comes from the fact that though we will always have some *part* of ourselves bound up with the *we*, the amount of this entanglement can vary (with length of time of collective etc.).

Acknowledging variability in the experience of normative pain requires a re-understanding of Gilbert by moving away from voluntary wills being

8 Bratman (1999, 2007).

9 Note that this is not a use that Bratman has need to employ for he rejects the idea of direct normative constraint by a collective will.

10 Or at least if there is variance it is not of this sort.

11 Post-hoc reconceptualising our contributions is logically possible but seems to be a kind of inauthenticity for that is how, at the moment of our actions, we set them out to be.

pooled to wills becoming entangled over time perhaps in a sub-voluntary way, but I contend that this fits better with our phenomenological experience of being in love. Imagining one's life without one's significant other, imaging the non-existence of this *we*, is thus a conceptual issue rather than just an epistemic one – and this is how it grounds normative constraint.

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